
The Sources of Inspiration for Happy Birthday, Wanda June by Kurt Vonnegut: Odyssey and Ernest Hemingway

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Abstract

Happy Birthday, Wanda June is one of the few plays the American author Kurt Vonnegut tried his hand at. It is very well-known that, as the writer himself openly confesses, Homer's Odyssey is the source of inspiration for the play. The influence of Ernest Hemingway in terms of forming characters, notably the hero, is another fact revealed by the author as well. In this paper taking these two points as discrete items of focus, the attention is drawn to Vonnegut's parodying Odysseus' homecoming after some twenty years and Hemingway's portrayal of war heroes who could kill many people pitilessly and have macho attitudes towards women. This paper seeks to analyze the writer's ongoing reference to Odysseus and Ernest Hemingway on the basis of the main character in terms of intertextuality in the satiric comedy Happy Birthday, Wanda June.

Keywords: Kurt Vonnegut, Ernest Hemingway, Intertextuality, Odyssey, Happy Birthday, Wanda June.

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Kurt Vonnegut'in Happy Birthday, Wanda June Oyununun İlham Kaynakları: Odise Destanı ve Ernest Hemingway

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Öz

Happy Birthday, Wanda June Amerikalı yazar Kurt Vonnegut'ın kaleme aldığı az sayıdaki oyunlarından biridir. Bizzat yazarın da itiraf ettiği gibi, Homeros'un Odise yapıtının oyunun ilham kaynağı olduğu bilinmektedir. Başta kahraman olmak üzere karakterleri oluşturmada Ernest Hemingway'in etkisi yine yazar tarafından açıkça ifade edilen diğer bir gerçekliktir. Bu iki noktayı bağımsız çalışma alanı olarak ele alan bu makalede Vonnegut'ın, Odise'nin yirmi yıl sonra eve dönüşünü ve Ernest Hemingway'in, gözünü kırpmadan çok sayıda adam öldüren ve kadınlara karşı maço tavır takınan savaş kahramanlarını resmetmesini alaya alışına dikkat çekilmektedir.

Bu makale, satirik komedi Happy Birthday, Wanda June oyununda yazarın ana kahramanı temel alarak sürekli Odise'ye ve Ernest Hemingway'e gönderide bulunmasını metinler arasılık açısından incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kurt Vonnegut, Ernest Hemingway, Metinler arasılık, Odise, Happy Birthday, WandaJune.

Introduction

This study focuses on *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* by Kurt Vonnegut, one of the most adept American writers and satirists. The themes of cruelty of war and its emotional costs are central to the play as Penelope, one of the characters puts it at the very beginning of the play addressing to the audience: "This is a simple-minded play about men who enjoy killing - and those who don't" (p. 19). Having been deeply affected by his war memories in Dresden, where the slaughterhouse he took refuge in along with other war prisoners was bombed by allied powers, Vonnegut brought what he called "things that really matter" (qtd. in Smith, 2007, p. 3) onto the stage. *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* is thus an account of Vonnegut's views on life with wars, the relationship between men and women and cultural change. These themes have been shaped around two points which are *Odyssey's* story of homecoming from war and Vonnegut's assumptions on Hemingway's philosophy concerning humanity. That is why the aim of this paper is to shed light on the relationship between these points within the framework of intertextuality, which serve as crucial background information for the play.

Intertextuality is based on the idea that a work cannot exist independent from other texts. A text has not got a single source and cannot be original because each work is closely related to others and this interaction keeps going. There are no more sharp lines between texts. Therefore it is meaningless to evaluate a text as self-contained. Reader is an active one in the process since his/her assessment is another text. Both texts and readers get involved in an intertextuality circle. A text does not have a single "theological" meaning or "the 'message' of the Author-God" as used by Roland Barthes because a text is not made up of a "line of words" suggesting a single meaning but instead "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (1988:156). Meaning is always in motion and deferred. Different and numerous quotations and cultures become the source. Intertextuality aims to enrich the environment of thoughts and thus leading up to a clear understanding.

Happy Birthday, Wanda June is the story of an American family in which Harold Ryan, the father, disappears in the jungles of the Amazon in search of diamonds and is not back for eight years. He is a very macho man and egoistic war hero, who enjoys killing enemies and hunting animals. He joins the Second World War and the Spanish War and introduces himself as "Harold Ryan, her [referring to Penelope, his wife] husband. I have killed

perhaps two hundred men in wars of various sorts--as a professional soldier. I have killed thousands of other animals as well--for sport” (p. 19).

His wife Penelope accepting the death of her husband gets educated and engaged to a doctor. Paul, their son, on the other hand, still believes in his father's being alive and turns out to be right when his father returns home after eight years and finds nothing the same as he left, notably his wife no longer an uneducated fool but as an attractive lady having two suitors.

Odyssey and Ernest Hemingway as the Sources of Inspiration for Happy Birthday, Wanda June

The play is based on two issues. One of them is Odysseus' homecoming story after war in Homer's *Odyssey* and the other one is the way Ernest Hemingway characterizes his war heroes. The homecoming story of Odysseus from war is linked to the play as Vonnegut puts it in one of his conversations:

It is a pacifistic play, it mocks hunters. It is today but no one is uniform. It is about Odysseus, a splendid talker, a big athlete. He comes home after the war and finds everyone is laughing at him. The Homeric image was proper to its time, but if Odysseus came home now it would be ludicrous - we don't need hunters or pirates any more. (qtd. in Gussow, 1999, p. 23)

Along with that relationship between *Happy Birthday* and *Odyssey*, there appears a difference between the two: Harold's wife, Penelope, who has the same name as Odysseus' wife, is not faithful to Harold as Odysseus' wife is to her husband. That difference was the inspiration for the play and it was expressed by Vonnegut that “40 years ago it had just seemed to him “preposterous... ridiculous,” that “Penelope should have no love life” all those years that Odysseus was away” (qtd. in Tallmer, 2004, p. 1).

The other point *Happy Birthday* is based on is Vonnegut's approach to Ernest Hemingway's worldview. “Hemingway has been as important and certainly as unsettling a force in Vonnegut's fiction as Dresden...” (Broer, 2001, p.65). When Kurt Vonnegut and Ernest Hemingway and their lives are inspected, it is clearly seen that they have some similarities from certain aspects and share a similar fate. To start with, they were both famous

novelists in American literature if not contemporaries. While Vonnegut is seen as a representative of counterculture with his novels, the works of Ernest Hemingway are seen as the classics of American literature and he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Nobel Prize for literature. Secondly both writers had suffered bereavement as a result of parental suicide: Ernest Hemingway's father and Vonnegut's mother, which caused great destruction for both. Thirdly they were both soldiers and journalists before their writing career and finally they experienced depression as a result of which they attempted to suicide: Vonnegut failed, but Hemingway succeeded, which was expressed as "Hemingway 1, Vonnegut 0" (qtd. in Marshall, 2008: 11). Vonnegut was a lifelong smoker, which was a "classy way to commit suicide" (qtd. in Barber, 2006) while Hemingway was a lifelong drinker. Vonnegut showed great admiration for his predecessor, Hemingway "as an artist of the highest order" (Broer, 2001: 66). He read and appreciated Hemingway's work and applauded his Nobel Prize. "Yet it is to separate himself from Hemingway, to damn, not praise, that Vonnegut usually speaks of his fellow artist-warrior" (Broer, 2001: 66). The point on which the two writers break up is related to their perceptions of values of humanity and concept of war. Since they both had experiences of wartime, their perceptions of humanity were based on their wartime memories. While Hemingway believed in the superiority of masculine virtues and thought man "attains nobility through battle, courage and defeat" (Marshall, 2008: 12), Vonnegut emphasized the superiority of peace over wars and worried about the ecosystem. Regarding his concerns about the ecosystem in his essay collection *A Man without a Country*, Vonnegut concludes poetically:

When the last living thing
has died on account of us,
how poetical it would be
if Earth could say,
in a voice floating up
perhaps
from the floor
of the Grand Canyon,
"It is done."

People did not like it here. (2005: 137)

For Vonnegut kindness and caring were prominent virtues and these virtues were embodied in one of the characters in *Happy Birthday*, Dr. Woodyly: "I

find it disgusting and frightening that a killer should be a respected member of society. Gentleness must replace violence everywhere, or we are doomed” (p. 19), which is also expressed by a main character in one of Vonnegut’s best-selling novels *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*: “Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies — ‘God damn it, you’ve got to be kind’” (1965, 129).

Both novelists, Vonnegut and Hemingway, developed their worldviews as a response to their experiences during wartime but

Hemingway responded in the traditional straight-ahead manner of American heroes like Davy Crockett, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant and John Wayne: the goal in war is to be victorious, or at least to be courageous and unyielding in defeat. Vonnegut, in contrast, became a principle architect of the post-modern, absurdist sensibility based on the conclusion that wars couldn’t be won at all. (Marshall, 2008: 12)

As a natural outcome of Vonnegut’s attitude towards the very nature of wars, *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, was written in 1970 as a reaction to Vietnam War and a few years earlier when Vonnegut was writing *Happy Birthday*, the United States was “deep in the coils of Vietnam” (Tallmer, 2004: 1) upon which many years later Vonnegut would say “Vietnam was a terrible mistake. In the end we got kicked out. Never mind where we are now” (Tallmer, 2004: 1).

Considering all those mentioned above, it seems that Vonnegut wanted to write a satiric comedy play in which he could make use of homecoming story of Oedipus as an inspiration for the play as well as showing his disdain for Hemingway’s philosophy by means of the characterization of Harold Ryan, the main character:

A considerably better off-Broadway offering, though more disappointing because more was to be expected of it, was *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, which had some passages of the shrewd observation of contemporary idiocies that one remembers from his novels, its picture of deflation Hemingway-like poseur seemed dated in conception and lost momentum less than half-way through and one had to settle for incidental felicities in Vonnegut’s gibes at familiar

American targets, and for amusing performances by most of the actors, but not by Kevin McCarthy [in movie version] in the Hemingway role. (Rudin, 1971: 157)

In order to get a better understanding of the relationship between these three figures, Harold Ryan, Odysseus and Ernest Hemingway, the issue should be handled through a comparison:

First, imagine a modern Odysseus returning home to Ithaca after being gone for years and presumed dead. He finds his home occupied by obnoxious suitors plotting to sleep with his wife, a confused son, and a wife whose affections have understandably cooled after so long a separation. Now imagine that the modern Odysseus is Ernest Hemingway [characterized by Harold Ryan], and while the Ithaca he left was the America of 1962, he has returned to an unfamiliar America of flower power, the sexual revolution, burgeoning civil rights for blacks, women and gays, rock music and peace marches! (Marshall, 2008: 13)

Harold Ryan is a sort of representative of Ernest Hemingway in terms of several features. Firstly he joined the Second World War and the Spanish War and so did Ernest Hemingway. Secondly Penelope is Harold's fourth wife and Hemingway had been married to four women during his lifetime. Like Hemingway Harold Ryan believes in the importance of masculine virtues attained through battle and defeat and what is more any cruelty during a war does not need to make sense, which he expresses in one of his dialogues with his friend, Looseleaf, who dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki:

LOOSELEAF. Anybody who'd drop an atom bomb on a city has to be pretty dumb.

HAROLD. The one direct, decisive, intelligent act of your life!

LOOSELEAF. (shaking his head) I don't think so (pause). It could have been.

HAROLD. If what?

LOOSELEAF. If I hadn't done it. If I'd said to myself, "Screw it. I'm going to let all those people down there live."

HAROLD. They were enemies. We were at war. (p. 94)

Thirdly Harold Ryan likes hunting and killing enemies and enjoys going on safari, which is clear enough when we look at the walls of their New York apartment covered with the heads of stuffed animals. Ernest Hemingway is also known to be fond of safari and hunting. The fourth one is that we see Harold Ryan as a man seeing women and children as weak creatures. His reaction to his wife's having education in his absence is a total disappointment: "educating a beautiful woman is like pouring honey into a fine Swiss watch: everything stops" (p. 47-48). As far as Hemingway is concerned, it is quite similar as Anne Trubek puts it: "Back then, there was one word for Hemingway-misogynist and we bandied it about with relish in class discussions. When discussing other writers, we would use his name to shorthand problematic depictions of women: "Heming way esque" (2011: 68).

The final perspective of that comparison between Harold Ryan and Hemingway is that both return to an unfamiliar America. Eight years later, Harold, having been captured by the Indians in the Amazon rainforest, is back in his house one day and realizes that nothing is as he left: his wife is no longer the uneducated, silly carhop and has two suitors. Harold's son being confused is not manly enough as he is supposed to be, and finally notions of sensitivity and peace have replaced heroism and courage as Harold says: "What kind of a country has this become? The men wear beads and refuse to fight and the women adore them. America's days of greatness are over" (p. 97). It is also same with Hemingway, who after many years of living in different countries: Italy, France, Cuba, Spain, finally returned to an unfamiliar America in 1960, which is a significant date in the sense that 1960s became a period when the movements for civil rights of African Americans and other disadvantaged groups.

Conclusion

Happy Birthday, Wanda June focuses on specific issues such as the relationship between men and women and cultural change. Based on what we have discussed so far, it would not be wrong to say that with Vonnegut's such recurring themes as senselessness of violence and boredom of life, the play is a direct reflection of the writer's worldview and was written as a reaction to the practices and thoughts against this worldview. Besides, the alteration Vonnegut made regarding the events of epic reflects Vonnegut's attitude towards woman rights. On the other hand, the complex relationship between Vonnegut and Hemingway and Vonnegut's disdain for

Hemingway's philosophy about the world and humanity constitutes the base of the play. In that sense Vonnegut, in the play through the characterization of Harold Ryan, seems to portray the part of Hemingway he detests. Under the light of what has been discussed above it can be said that as a result of such a mutual conception the play *Happy Birthday* came into being. Since the inspiration behind the play was homecoming story of Odysseus from war and the characterization of the hero echoes that of Hemingway, in that sense *Happy Birthday*, *Wanda June* could be regarded an example of intertextuality as well.

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